



STATE OF ALASKA
DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
COMMUNITY AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Office of the Commissioner

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State, military, village team up for relocation

(Anchorage, Alaska) – The Department of Commerce, Community and Economic Development is playing a central role in the relocation of the western Alaska village of Newtok. Through its Division of Community and Regional Affairs, the department has administered several grants designed to aid in the multi-phase project, and has been coordinating the interagency group providing assistance to the community. Most recently, a \$4 million legislative grant was put to work for the construction of a road and evacuation shelter for the Yupik Eskimo village located west of Bethel.

The otherwise expensive and lengthy process of relocating the village of about 350 residents, which has been losing ground to river erosion and thawing permafrost for many years, has been made more economical with the assistance of the military. Through the federal Department of Defense's Innovative Readiness Training program, personnel from all military branches are providing the labor and some of the transportation of needed materials.

"We are extremely fortunate to have the support of the Innovative Readiness Training program in this ambitious, multiagency undertaking," said Commissioner Susan Bell. "Helping to build strong communities is part of what DCRA is about. But without the help of the military in Newtok, the cost of relocation would be prohibitive."

Innovative Readiness Training provides hands-on work for military personnel who get to hone skills that will be put to use in nation-building activities in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. The Army Corps of Engineers, with the help of the Newtok Traditional Council and state Department of Transportation and Public Facilities, recently finished the design phase of the road, which will link a barge landing with the new village site and planned evacuation shelter.

"Having partnerships like this is a win-win situation for everyone involved," said Capt. Karen Trueblood, director of the Innovative Readiness Training program. "It's an outstanding logistics training opportunity for the military. In addition to the engineering and logistical training, personnel are training in medical, dental, field food services, water purification and project management. The teams are totally self-sufficient and replicating a forward deployed operations base, while the state and community gain some needed infrastructure."

The road is expected to be finished this year, with 2015 the target for completion of the evacuation shelter, an airstrip, a gravel quarry and additional roads. Located 480 miles west of Anchorage on the Ninglick River, Newtok has lost an average of 50 feet of riverbank per year recently. The community has been further subjected to the elements by the breakdown of its foundational permafrost, which is melting and sinking.